



**For Immediate Distribution
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Kilili: more eligible for food stamps, up to 23% benefit increase agreed

Thanks Biden administration move toward parity

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan announced today that more families will be eligible for food aid through the Marianas Nutrition Assistance Program and their maximum benefit will increase 23 percent under a new memorandum of understanding negotiated with the Biden administration for fiscal year 2022. The benefit increase will be retroactive to October 1, Congressman Sablan said.

The changes, which move the Marianas towards parity with the national Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, are possible because of the significant funding that Sablan has made available for Marianas NAP. The \$30 million dollars the Congressman included in the American Rescue Plan will be released with the signing of the MOU.

“I want to thank Secretary Tom Vilsack, and especially his Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, Stacey Dean, with whom I have been working for several years on improving food assistance to Marianas families,” Sablan said. “The new MOU they have agreed moves the income threshold for eligibility from 100 percent of the federal poverty level to 130 percent, as is used nationwide for SNAP.

“More Marianas families will now be eligible for food assistance,” Sablan said. It is estimated as many as 2,000 additional participants may be added to the program.

Benefits to increase

For a family of four on Saipan the new monthly benefit maximum will be \$1,231, on Rota and the Northern Islands \$1,498, and on Tinian \$1,301.

Benefits in the Marianas will now be more than in the lower 48 U.S. States, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands and will include the nationwide 23 percent increase that Secretary Vilsack announced for SNAP recipients earlier this year.

NAP benefits will be the same as SNAP benefits in Guam for fiscal 2022. The Marianas benefits were first raised to the Guam level this year after Congressman Sablan

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included an additional \$14 million for NAP in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2021.

“In addition, Rota, Tinian, and Northern Islands families will continue to receive their current differential over and above the 23 percent increase,” Sablan explained. Benefits for Rota and the Northern Islands are 21.7 percent higher than the Saipan base amount; for Tinian the differential is 5.7 percent.

The Agriculture Department agreed to increase food stamps for Rota, Tinian, and the Northern Islands families in 2014. Sablan made the case to then-Food and Nutrition Services Administrator Audrey Rowe that the higher benefits were needed to make up for the higher cost of food on those islands. Later that year he included \$30.5 million for Marianas NAP in the Agricultural Act of 2014, allowing higher benefits for families on Saipan, too.

Rainy-day fund will protect families

“A priority for me was to make sure no one is thrown out of the program or has their benefits cut, as Governor Torres did to families last October, right in the middle of the pandemic,” Sablan said. “That was totally unnecessary because in Congress we added an extra \$14 million for Marianas NAP in the FY21 appropriation and \$30 million more in the American Rescue Plan.

“To be sure families will not be hurt like that again, the new MOU will set up a rainy-day fund for periods of increased and unexpected need.”

The Agriculture Department has assured Congressman Sablan there will be sufficient funds available to cover the increased number of eligible households, the benefit increases, and creation of the rainy-day fund. But Congressman Sablan also asked President Biden to increase the annual block grant for food aid to the Marianas, which the President did—from \$12 million to \$30 million—in his fiscal 2022 budget released in May.

The House passed the FY22 appropriation with the \$30 million grant for the Marianas in July, consistent with the President’s budget recommendation.

Step-by-step progress towards inclusion in SNAP

Sablan has worked with Deputy Under Secretary Dean for several years in the context of House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer’s Task Force on Poverty and Opportunity. Dean was a food advocate with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. And Sablan has

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been meeting with her one-on-one since President Biden appointed her to the Agriculture Department, advocating for moving the Marianas to inclusion in SNAP.

The Congressman's long-term goal remains full inclusion in SNAP for the Marianas. "The improvements in the FY22 MOU are big steps in the right direction," he said. "But there are income deductions, training opportunities, and other aspects of SNAP that I want families in the Marianas to be eligible for and will continue working with Deputy Under Secretary Dean to achieve."